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TEACHING WRITING FOR PLEASURE
IN AN ANICINAPE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Our report provides an account on a part of an action-research project on the development of writing skills in Anicinapek and Innu elementary students, in collaboration with elementary schools in two communities, one in Abitibi-Temiscamingue and the other of the North Shore[1] (Da Silveira & al, 2015a;. Da Silveira & al, 2015b). The general approach on this project was to find solutions to the problems in teaching of writing raised by teachers. Teams were formed, in dyad and in triads, involving a researcher and one or two teachers. A support system was established from the discussion between the researcher specialized in writing didactics and the partners, two fifth-grade and sixth-grade teachers; it was then tested in a school in Abitibi-Temiscamingue. In this article, we briefly describe the context in which emerged this support system as well as the school and the actors involved in the process. We then present the features of the system, changes in the practices of teachers, and benefits for pupils. Finally, we identify three factors conducive to the success of the support system.

CONTEXTUALIZATION ELEMENTS OF THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION-RESEARCH APPROACH[2]

Conducted in collaboration with staff from each school of the communities concerned, our study aimed, among others, to support teachers in developing and testing new writing practices taking in account the relationship to writing of students[3]. In teaching French, notions of relationship to writing (écriture) (Barré-De Miniac, 2000, 2002) and relationship to writing (écrit) (Chartrand & Blaser, 2008; Blaser, Saussez, Bouhon, 2014) provide a conceptual framework allowing to consider the teaching of writing based on various dimensions that influence the learning of it: the feelings and values of the writers on writing, their beliefs about the role of writing, their scholastic and writing practices (Da Silveira & al., 2015b). The concept of relationship to writing, presented to teachers at the beginning of the action-research and more specifically its affective dimension, has particularly caught the attention of two teachers working in the third cycle of the Anicinape elementary school in Abitibi–Temiscamingue. Aware that writing activities were generally perceived as a burden by many of their students in fifth and sixth grades, these teachers have expressed their intention to take up the challenge to do activities that rhyme with "pleasure" for most students. The concerned teachers also had the intuition that if the students' interest in writing grew, their skill in this area would be even better. The researchers' response consisted of an offer to support the teachers in their process; they then agreed to engage in a reflection on their teaching-of-writing practices in collaboration with one of the team's researchers. Thus, during the 2013–2014 school year, a series of five triad meetings occurred from October to May. Given the distance separating the teachers and the researcher, four meetings were held in videoconferencing while the last was held in the school in spring 2014.

The institution where activities took place is a band school with a hundred students and nine classroom

teachers. The two teachers involved in the action-research were, respectively, in 2013–2014, homeroom teachers in grade 5 with 13 students, and grade 6 with nine students. Both from the community where the school is located, these teachers were accustomed to working together. Both had used several strategies to regulate the activities in each phase of the writing process. For example, at the planning stage, they would willingly use brainstorming to stimulate the students' imagination. They also provided cards with questions to encourage students to gather information before starting to write. At the editing-correcting stage, one of the teachers proposed to students to leave the class—alone or with another student—to revise their texts by reading it aloud. In other words, teachers were well equipped to teach writing; however, certain situations or attitudes of students towards writing seemed problematic to them. Their participation in the action-research appeared to them as a good opportunity to initiate a reflection on their practices.

Based on dialogue and joint problem-solving, support took the form of a spiral process. A discussion on the current practices started from the questions asked by teachers—for example, how to enrich the students' vocabulary? How to better stimulate their imagination when writing a text?—and gave rise to a search for solutions based on current teaching-of-writing knowledge taking into account the teaching context and tools available in the school. Between meetings, the teachers proceeded in their respective classrooms to adjustments of their usual teaching-of-writing practices, even experimented new ones. All

agreed that they would document their teaching of writing activities in a logbook. Thus, at the next meeting with the researcher, teachers gave an account of the writing activities done with students based, among others, on their logbook, describing through their interactions the positive aspects of the experiments as well as their limits. Then began a search-for-new-solution process aimed at deepening the same problematic issue enriched from the recent experiments, to formulate a new problematic from the teachers' concerns or comments. The establishment of this particular research context fostered the advent of changes in teachers' teaching-of-writing practices.

CHANGES IN TEACHING-OF-WRITING PRACTICES

Among the changes made by teachers throughout the action-research process, the most significant relates to the frequency and variety of student writing activities proposed. While teachers were accustomed to perform four or five large writing projects in a school year, they seized the opportunity to experience a different approach: have pupils write more often by asking them shorter texts, in various genres. Thus, during the 2013–2014 school year, in the fifth-grade class, pupils participated in 22 writing activities within six text genres; in the sixth grade class, 16 activities within four genres were performed. The teachers rapidly observed that students appreciated this way of working that is to produce short texts in various genres more frequently. They were less reluctant to this approach than towards the previous

CHART 1 : Writing activities produced in the fifth-grade class of elementary

TEXTUAL GENRES	TITLES OF WRITING ACTIVITIES
Fictional narrative (8*)	La rivière aux Castors, L'Halloween, Le récit, Jour de tempête, Les étoiles du match, La reine et le garde (La fourmi), Dans la mine, Without title
Personal story (6)	Mes vacances d'été, Mon congé culturel (automne), Mon congé des fêtes, Ma semaine de relâche, Mon congé de Pâques, Mon congé culturel (printemps)
Letter (3)	Saint-Nicolas (1 letter to Santa Claus), Correspondence with Swiss students (2 letters per student)
Advertising message (1)	Advertising for Sochi Olympics
Documentary (3)	Spring, Bustards, The Barn Owl
Poster (1)	Bustards

* Number of texts of this genre produced

where teachers proposed their long-term projects. During the 2014–2015 school year, the school management implemented a reorganization of teaching duties in the third cycle. This led the fifth-grade class and sixth-grade class homeroom teachers involved in the research to teach, for one, French for all students and for the other, to teach mathematics. This has allowed the fifth-grade teacher to continue exercising writing skills with students she had had in her class in 2013–2014 during the year of action-research experimentation.

The following table shows the kinds of texts, their number and titles of writing activities performed by students of the fifth-grade class during the 2013–2014 year. Note that the teacher, who had observed a clear difference in the students' involvement according to their interest in a subject, chose the themes that she knew would reach youths of her community's curiosity, for instance: seasons, forest, bustards, and important common holidays for these pupils, like Christmas or Halloween.

It is interesting to note that during the 2014–2015 school year, although the teacher was not systematically accompanied by the researcher specialized in writing didactics, she continued to teach writing using the same approach as the previous year, in other words by having students write in various genres frequently. During that year, the pupils produced 20 texts in eight different genres (fictional account, personal narrative, biography, abstract, poem, letter of opinion, documentary article, recipes). The teacher enjoyed following the same students for a second year and was able to observe how her new teaching-of-writing practices produced results: first, she actually succeeded in making writing rhyme with pleasure, as much for herself as for the students; then, she realized that with the training, the pupils set about their work more easily, were less hesitant before the blank page and produced even longer texts: "[The students] felt inspired. I had never seen that. So, I too had fun with it, and that was just for pleasure. You see, there were some who were proud. Some wrote: 'It was my most creative work!' (Excerpt from the final interview with the teacher).

To document the impact of this writing training, we compared the lengths of the texts of two students monitored by the teacher for two consecutive years. For the purposes of this comparison, she selected two students she considered respectively average (Student A) and high level (Student B) from their results in French during the school year. The comparison between the students was to highlight the remarkable progress of Student A, whom in less than two years, has caught up with Student B in terms of average of written words per text. In fact, she went from a 130-word production in average per text in fifth grade to a 180-word production in average per text in sixth grade, an increase of 40%. Furthermore, while in the fifth grade, Student A's longest text had 210 words; in sixth grade, her

CHART 2 : Comparing the length and number of the writings of two students during two years

	Student A (average)		Student B (high level)	
	2013-2014	2014-2015	2013-2014	2014-2015
	5th grade	6th grade	5th grade	6th grade
Number of texts produced	21/22	19/20	21/22	18/20
Word average (per text)	130	180	169	180
Longest text	210	470	309	456
Number of texts of over 200 words	2	5	7	6

longest text reached 470 words and she produced five texts of more than 200 words that year, compared to only two the previous year. Note that, for the most part, the teacher did not provide instruction on the maximum length of the texts, giving students freedom in this regard.

Although we are comparing two pupils only, we establish a possible link between the teacher's new teaching-of-writing practices and improvement in writing of student A. Note that, in the action-research context, we have not observed and analyzed systematically student progress in terms of performance in spelling, grammar and syntax, because it was not a target of the research. It is interesting to note that the count of lexical or grammatical spelling errors in two texts of similar genres produced by Student A one year apart—the stories about spring break 2013 and 2014—reveal a marked improvement since the number of errors made by the pupil dropped by 50%.

FACTORS EXPLAINING THE SUCCESS OF THE SUPPORT PROCESS

The system proved profitable for teachers and students as for researchers. Three factors seem decisive in the success of the support established between teachers and the research team. The first relates to the teachers' commitment at the beginning of the action-research; they were available to participate in activities offered by the researchers. They demonstrated an open mind by agreeing to question their usual teaching-of-writing practices and experiment with new ones.

The fact that pupils responded quickly and well to these new practices is a second success factor because their positive attitude stimulated and encouraged teachers who, in turn, invested further in the research process. Finally, the research team was supported by two collaborators from the school.

The first was an Elder from the community who had a long career in teaching. The second was an education consultant, who played a decisive role: firstly, by facilitating contacts between the researchers, the school management, and teachers; secondly, ensuring that the research team never lost sight of the reality of the Aboriginal educational context. This article provides us with an opportunity to reiterate our gratitude to them. ◂◂

NOTES

[1] Research: *Exploration de nouvelles pratiques d'enseignement pour favoriser le développement de la compétence à écrire d'élèves anicinapek et innus du primaire*, financée par le FRQSC (2012-2015)

[2] The reader should refer to our article in Volume 1 of the *Journal of Perseverance and Academic Achievement for First Peoples* for more information about the methodology.

[3] Our study included six teachers, three educational consultants, and five researchers. The results presented here relate only to the accompaniment done in the community of Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

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